Archaeological investigations at land north-east of Beech Avenue, Bracklesham, West Sussex

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Archaeological investigations on agricultural land off Beech Avenue, Bracklesham, revealed evidence of two phases of late Iron Age/early Roman land enclosure, the first an embryonic system comprising two possible fields, the second an extensive coaxial field system with trackways. Of particular interest is an alignment of large post-holes, parallel to an associated boundary within the field system, interpreted as a substantial fence or palisade. While the limited finds recovered hampered interpretation, it is possible it marked the point of access to a property or facility. No contemporary enclosures with such a substantial structure are known on the coastal plain or more widely within Sussex. The few known examples are generally of 2nd century AD date or later. A change in the use of landscape was evident around the end of the 1st or beginning of the 2nd century, with an apparent intentional creation of a more open landscape. This was followed by a hiatus in activity, around the 4th century, followed by the construction of new boundaries on an altered alignment. Two small sherds of residual early Roman pottery were recovered from this field system; however, the alignments are more in keeping with those of local landscape features such as that of Broad Rife and Drove Lane, to the south of Earnley, considered to be alignments of medieval or later date.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology South-East (UCL Institute of Archaeology) was commissioned by CgMs Heritage to carry out a series of archaeological investigations in advance of the residential development of a 2.4ha plot north-east of Beech Avenue, Bracklesham (NGR SZ 809967). The site lies at four metres AOD and is roughly trapezoidal or wedge-shaped. It is situated on the western half of the Manhood Peninsula on the low-lying coastal plain in West Sussex (Fig. 1).

The British Geological Survey (BGS 2017) records the underlying geology as Wittering Formation sand, silt and clay, overlain by undifferentiated river terrace deposits of sand, silt and clay. Planning permission was granted by Chichester District Council (APP/L3815/A/13/2192900), with a condition attached which required a programme of archaeological work be undertaken prior to the commencement of the development. Accordingly, following a desk-based assessment (CgMs 2012), an archaeological evaluation was undertaken in March 2014 (ASE 2014).

Multiple ditches, interpreted as field boundaries or drainage ditches of Romano-British date, were identified during these works, along with a cluster of deposits of fire-cracked flint in the eastern half of the site, interpreted as potential burnt mound material, typically of Bronze Age date.

These findings required a further phase of work and a targeted excavation was undertaken between April and May 2014 to establish the form and date of the deposits of fire-cracked flint, to characterise the Romano-British enclosures and to identify any associated settlement.

The final phase of work comprised a watching brief on the construction of the spine road, drainage and pond construction (Fig. 2). The results of all investigations were summarised in a post-excavation assessment report shortly after the completion of all fieldwork (Nicholls 2015).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Limited evidence for early prehistoric activity has been identified on the Sussex coastal plain, with the majority of known sites located to the north, on the higher ground of the South Downs. Just a single, residual, palaeolithic flint is known from the local area. It was recovered during large-scale archaeological investigations to the east of the site, at Medmerry, which resulted in the recovery

Fig. 1. Site location.

Fig. 2. Location of evaluation trenches, excavation areas and watching brief areas.

of significant new archaeological data for this part of the peninsula.

A small, mesolithic flint assemblage, partly from an *in-situ* knapping site, was also identified, along with a late mesolithic–early neolithic finds assemblage. The earliest occupation evidence was provided by a single, late neolithic–early Bronze Age pit, containing a pottery food vessel, along with a series of five burnt mounds radiocarbon dated to the early–middle Bronze Age transition (Stephenson 2019).

Further sites of this period on the Manhood Peninsula include a possible settlement of late Bronze Age date at Birdham (Stevens 2003). Settlement evidence has also been identified at Chichester Road, Selsey, including two roundhouses, some possible four-post structures and clusters of pits of the late Bronze Age/earliest Iron Age (Hammond and Preston 2005).

Regionally, Bronze Age activity is relatively well-known from the wider Sussex coastal plain. Large excavations undertaken at North Bersted and Oldlands Farm, Bognor, both produced evidence of intensive land use during this period (Taylor *et al.* 2014; Margetts 2015; Margetts 2019).

Historically, the coastal plain has produced few sites of early to middle Iron Age date, as noted by Bedwin (1983). However, more recently a growing number of mid–late Iron Age sites have been identified. The recent work at Medmerry has suggested reduced settlement until around 400 BC, followed by a limited return of settlement activity in the area, reducing the length of the perceived hiatus. Here the settlement evidence comprised a roundhouse and limited evidence for field systems, the majority probably belonging to the transitional period (Stephenson 2019).

Middle to late Iron Age settlement evidence is also known at Copse Farm, Oving (Bedwin and Holgate 1985). At North Bersted, two enclosed clusters of settlement have been excavated, dating from the middle of the 6th century BC and continuing in use into the late Iron Age (Bedwin and Pitts 1978; Taylor *et al.* 2014, 153–159).

A regionally rare early Iron Age settlement site was excavated at land off Main Road, Birdham, just five kilometres north of the site. Ditches, structures and a possible oven were identified (Wildman 1998), demonstrating that at least part of the peninsula was occupied during this period.

By the late Iron Age, the coastal plain is considered to have become an organised and stable area, characterised by an extensive and highly integrated agricultural landscape, interspersed with small farmsteads (Hart 2015). The centre of activity in the west, along with the localised power structure, seemingly switched from the downs and the large hillforts at Cissbury and the Trundle to lower lying, more fertile ground focused in and around Chichester (Bedwin 1983, 38; Davenport 2003, 105–106).

The Chichester Entrenchments (Historic Environment Record MWS6541) are situated to the north of the site, at a distance of approximately nine kilometres, and interpreted as delineating a territorial oppidum. The date of the entrenchments has been much debated over the years, with Iron Age through to medieval dates suggested. However, recent OSL dates from a section of the ditch at Halnaker, although broad, support the interpretation that the earthworks date from the later Iron Age (Doherty and Garland 2015, 41–46).

Pre-Roman origins of occupation at the Fishbourne Roman Palace site are also likely, with recent reassessment of the available evidence suggesting that the palace may have been constructed over a preceding Iron Age settlement of some status (Manley and Rudkin 2003, 138–145). The construction of the proto-palace phases at Fishbourne is considered to have occurred around AD 70–80, although the presence of Arretine wares at the site has led to suggestions of pre-conquest origins (Manley and Rudkin 2003, 3–4).

A second, similar Roman complex is also recorded on the Manhood Peninsula at Sidlesham, five kilometres north-east of the site. Excavations in 1954 identified an earlier ditch of late Iron Age/Claudian date, sealed by a layer dated from ceramic finds to the 1st century AD. The villa, potentially also worth considering as a possible proto-palace, post-dated this deposit and demonstrated at least three phases of construction and was associated with a large bathhouse (WSHER MWS5393).

Two Roman roads are postulated on the peninsula. A Roman road linking Fishbourne and Sidlesham was identified during a research excavation at Hunston Common (Anon 1997) and the West Sussex Historic Environment Record (WSHER) identifies a possible Roman road 100m west of the site, labelled as 'causeway' on Budgen's Map of Sussex, 1724, and now the route of the B2198 (CgMs 2012).

No physical evidence of this second road has ever been traced; however, the HER suggests the route may have linked Birdham with coastal facilities situated to the south-west of the site, potentially in the region of the now lost medieval village of Bracklesham.

Bracklesham has its origins in the Anglo-Saxon period and it is recorded that in AD 945 King Edmund gave to Alfred, Bishop of Selsey, four hides in Bracklesham and two in Thorney (Salzman 1953, 215). Bracklesham village was washed away at the end of the 13th century, when there were then only five households in the village plus a church, known from documentary evidence and recorded in the Pope Nicholas IV Taxation of 1291. The HER tentatively places the location of the church as 500m to the south-west of the site, within the English Channel. It is likely the church was the focus for the former village (CgMs 2012).

The Victoria County History records Bracklesham Farm, to the south of the site, as having its origins in the medieval period (Salzman 1953); however, this is not confirmed by the HER. Early mapping does not show Bracklesham, but both East Wittering and Earnley can be clearly identified, although in no detail (Saxton 1575).

By 1724 (Bugden), Bracklesham can be identified as a few structures at the end of the long straight 'causeway' from Birdham. Earnley is also clearly marked and enables the site location to be placed in the open land between the road and the village. The archaeological work at Medmerry identified evidence of medieval field systems around Earnley, 700m northeast of the site (Stephenson 2019).

CHRONOLOGICAL NARRATIVE

Detailed analysis of the sequence of deposits at Beech Avenue has led to four phases of activity being recognised, tentatively separated into three periods: late Iron Age/early Roman, early Roman, and post-Roman. Unfortunately, the paucity, poor condition and generally undiagnostic nature of the finds assemblage has left doubt as to the date of the post-Roman activity; however, comparisons with local landscape features has suggested a medieval date.

Excavations in all parts of the site revealed a variable natural substrate of river terrace deposits. This ranged from orange-yellow to red-brown, with occasional grey mottling, and consisted of areas of sandy clay and silt clay.

Two erratic boulders were identified in Excavation Area 2, lying within the natural substrate. The analysis of a subsample from boulder [152] confirmed that the stone consisted of a mid-grey (with slight greenish hue), crystalline, igneous rock similar to a hornblende granite or diorite in appearance. The original source of the stone was uncertain.

A great number of small to large erratic boulders have been found along the south coast of England between Portsmouth and Bognor Regis and for years have generated much speculation and study as to their source and the agents by which they were deposited, given that the region has no proven record of glaciation.

A recent pilot study was undertaken on erratic samples collected from head deposits along the Selsey coastline as part of the Medmerry project, with the aim of shedding some light on these questions. The results from the study showed a broad fit between the Medmerry samples and isotopic signatures from northern England, north-west Scotland and Norway, while sources such as south-west England and Sweden were excluded, or considered less likely.

A number of possible mechanisms for their deposition were considered likely, including a megaflood deposit from the breaching of the Strait of Dover or later ice-rafting of material from the Scandinavian Ice Sheet (Cooper *et al.* 2019). Without further analysis it is impossible to be certain if the erratics from Bracklesham share the same isotopic signatures as the erratics from Medmerry, but it is considered most likely that they should and, as such, share the same source and method of deposition.

Narrow, gravel-filled land drains were visible criss-crossing the area but there was little other visible disturbance of the site. However, many archaeological features were very shallow, suggesting that the site had been subject to a significant degree of horizontal truncation, probably a result of 19th- and 20th-century ploughing.

A total of 12 residual flint artefacts were recovered. Eleven of the artefacts were dated to the neolithic or Bronze Age on technological grounds and a single narrow bladelet is likely to be late mesolithic.

PERIOD 1, PHASE 1: LATE IRON AGE/ EARLY ROMAN

The earliest phase of identifiable activity at the site was a possible field system (FS1) predating the more extensive field system established later in period 1, phase 2 (Fig. 3). Just four shallow, fragmentary ditches were visible (G3–G6), all heavily truncated, particularly G4, which could not be traced beyond the extent of its evaluation trench.

Three of these were roughly parallel, orientated on an east-northeast to west-southwest alignment. The fourth was orientated on a north-northeast to south-southwest alignment and may have formed at least part of the east boundary of these enclosures, dividing the landscape into at least two rudimentary fields.

Stratigraphic relationships with ditches within period 1, phase 2, clearly indicated that this represented the earliest phase of activity. However, just two small undiagnostic sherds of pottery, considered to be of later prehistoric date, were recovered across this embryonic field system, leaving room for an earlier date for this phase than hypothesised, although the similarity in alignment between this system (FS1) and the proceeding one (FS2) suggests proximity in date.

PERIOD 1, PHASE 2: LATE IRON AGE/ EARLY ROMAN

At some point in the late Iron Age/early Roman period, the use of the landscape to the north-east of present day Bracklesham village dramatically intensified. An extensive coaxial field system (FS2) of long, narrow enclosures was laid out on a north-northeast to south-southwest alignment, similar to that of the previous field system FS1 (Fig. 4).

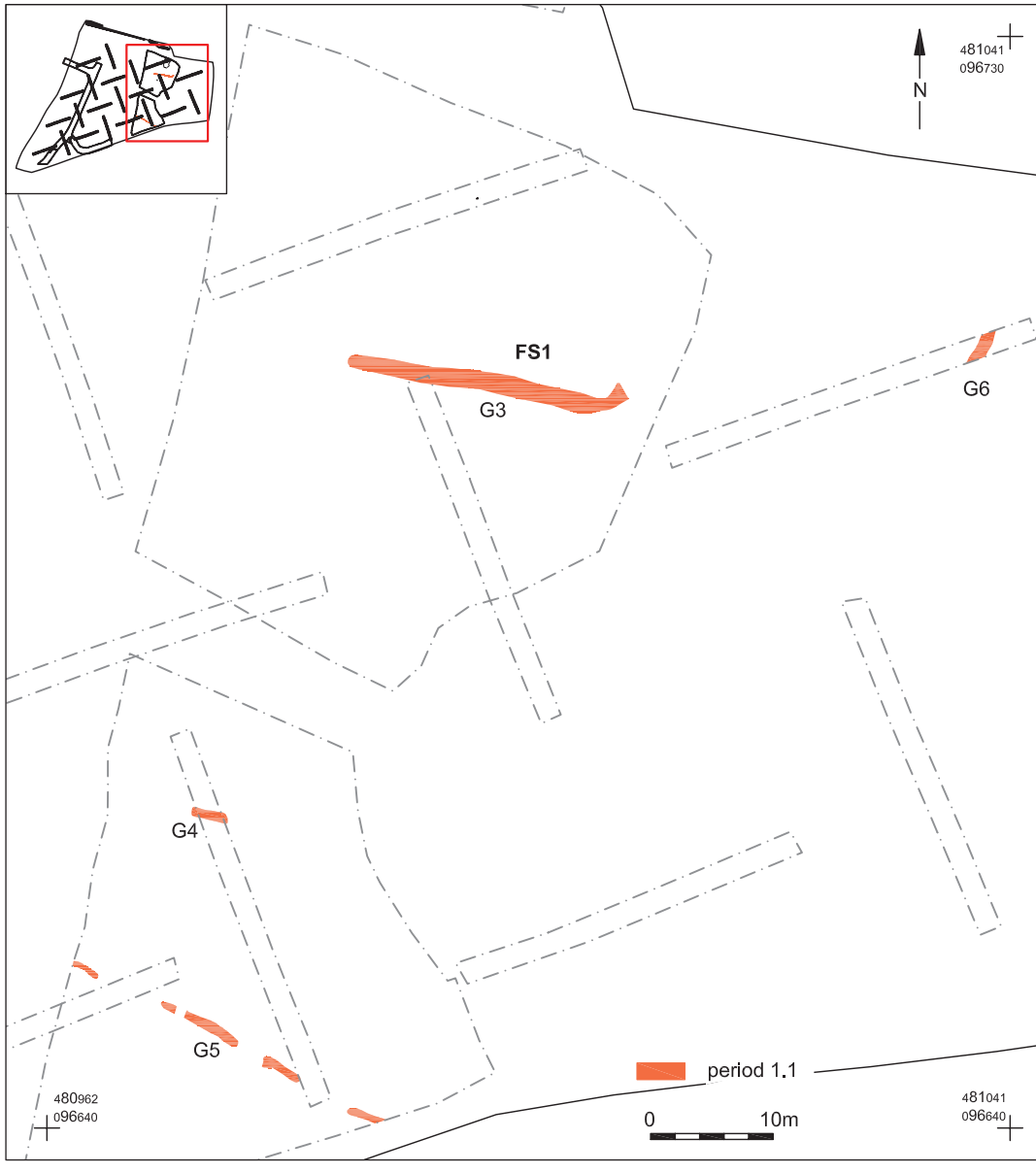

Fig. 3. Plan of period 1, phase 1 features.

The ditches comprising the only remaining evidence of this system ranged in size from 0.3m to 1.6m wide and from 0.1m to 0.65m deep, with the heaviest horizontal truncation seen in Excavation Area 2. A likely focal point of this landscape was a large rectangular enclosure (ENC1), encompassing an area of 68.5m x 21.7m, with an internal fence line or palisade (S1) running the length of its eastern boundary, offset by 1.2m, identifiable on the ground in a line of post-holes.

Most of this post-hole alignment was investigated under watching brief conditions. The features lay only partially within the monitored area, extending beyond the eastern limits of the

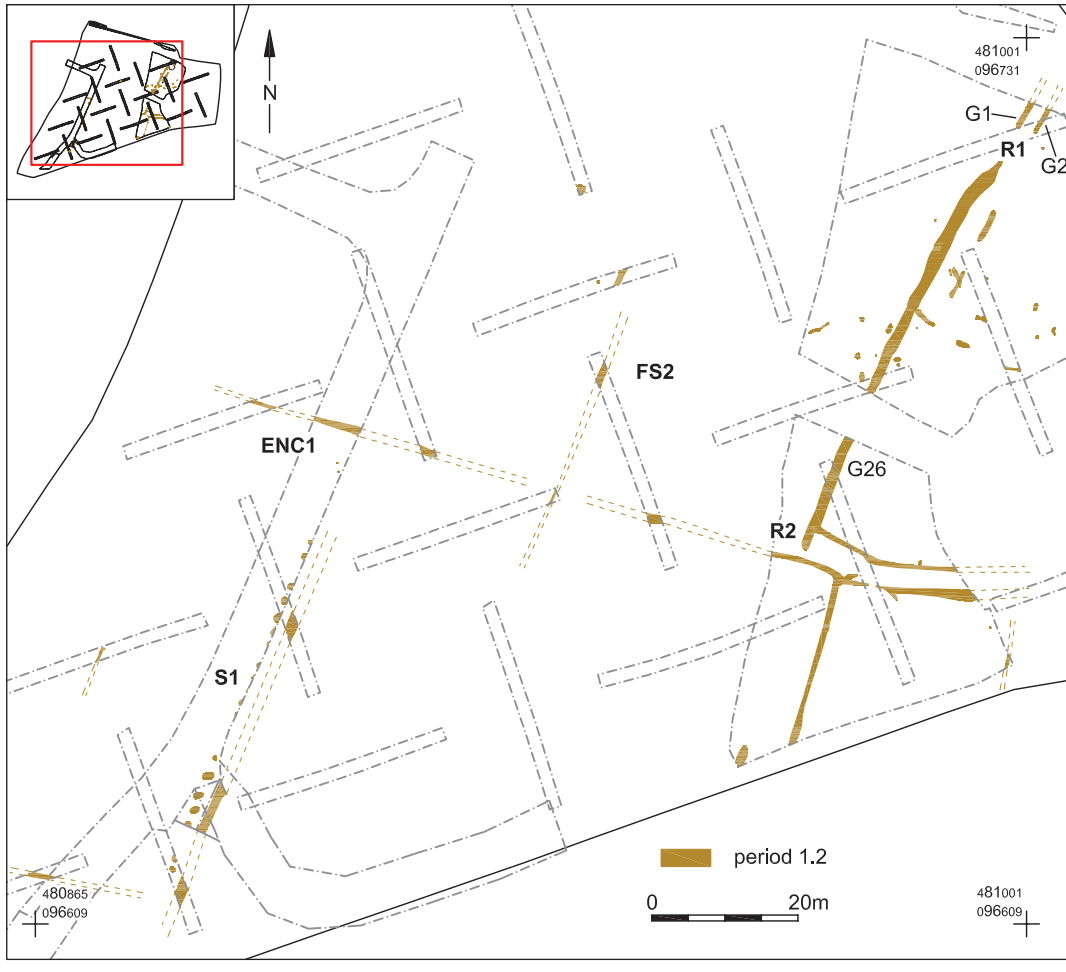

Fig. 4. Plan of period 1, phase 2 features.

spine road (Figs 5 and 6). In total, 19 post-holes (G16) were identified, five of which were fully exposed, the remainder only partially. The post-holes were generally oval in plan, with lengths of up to 1.65m, widths of up to 0.9m, and depths of between 0.2m and 0.5m.

Given the dimensions and narrow spacing of the post-holes, one metre apart, this fence line is likely to have been substantial. No evidence of post-pipes, where posts had rotted *in situ,* were identified but given the large oval shape of the post-holes, potentially indicating disturbance of the ground on removal, it is probable the posts and the fence they supported were dismantled when the structure fell into disuse.

The post-holes were generally filled with a single homogenous deposit. In a minority of cases they were filled with a basal fill, overlain by a deposit similar to the singular fills in the other post-holes. A gap was evident in the alignment of the post-holes, within the southern half of the row, potentially indicating a gateway providing access through the barrier to the fields to the east. However, the relevant portion of the associated ditch lay beyond the excavated area, unfortunately limiting the certainty of this interpretation.

Two other possible points of movement throughout the field system were identified. The first comprised a track or path (R1) aligned north-northeast to south-southwest and extending

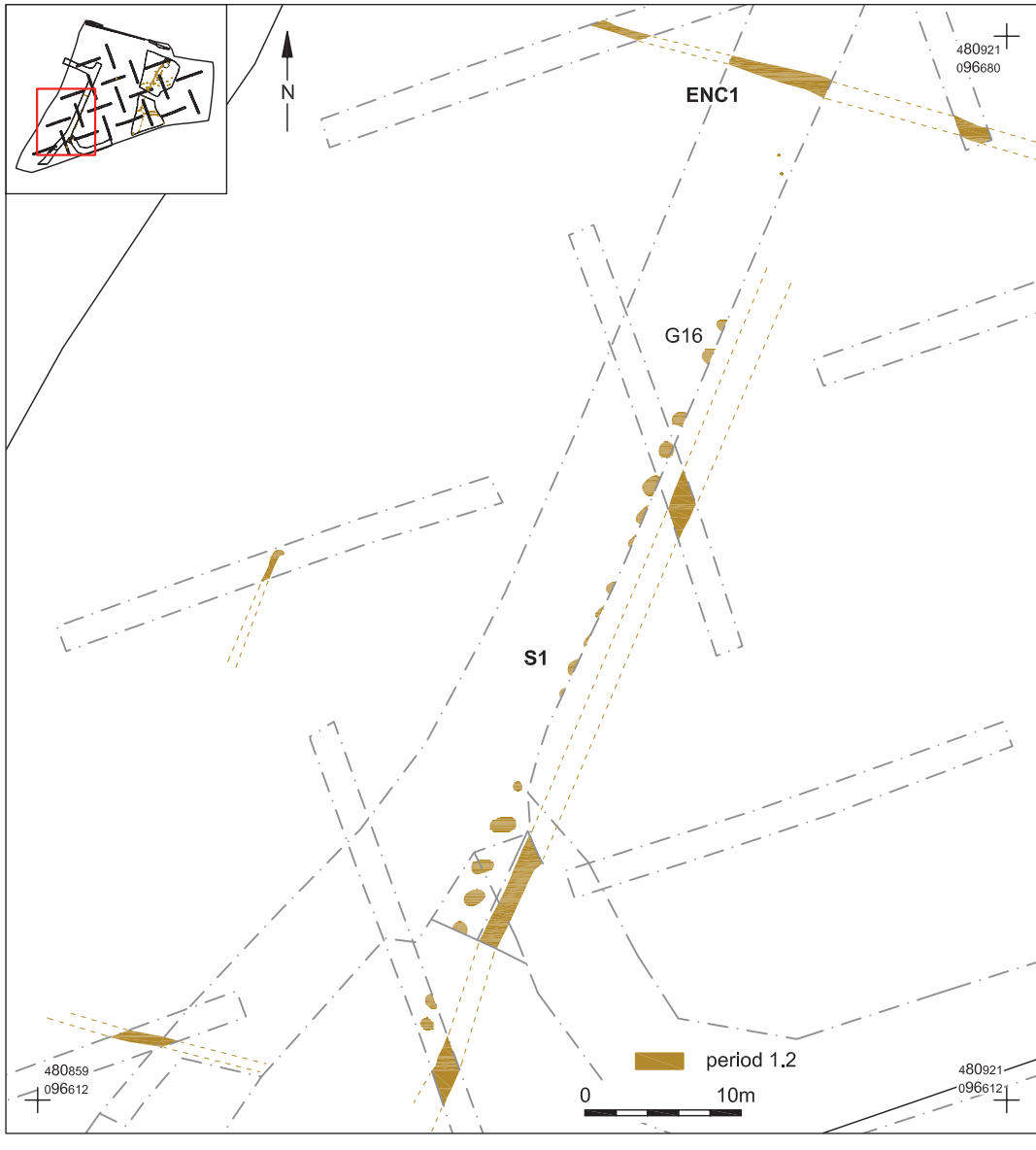

Fig. 5. Detailed plan of enclosure 1 (ENC1) and structure 1 (S1).

beyond the northern limits of Excavation Area 1 (Figs 4 and 7). Two parallel bounding ditches (G1 and G2), located 1.7m apart, were visible for a length of 6m before terminating.

A continuation of this route appears to have been picked up during subsequent archaeological evaluation works to the immediate north of the site at Clapper's Lane (ASE 2017). The narrow width of the area internal to the ditches certainly rules out an interpretation of a major thoroughfare, but it may have acted as an access between fields, or a path through the landscape.

This route was aligned parallel to the postulated Roman road labelled 'causeway' on early mapping, an alignment mirrored within the field system (FS2). As such, it is considered possible that the

Fig. 6. Photograph of ENC1 and S1, looking south.

hypothesised Roman road was contemporary with the period 1, phase 2 activity.

The second route, a trackway, was aligned west-northwest to east-southeast (R2) and was identified from parallel bounding ditches spaced 3.5m apart, extending eastwards beyond the visible field system. A narrowing of the trackway was discernible at its westernmost extent where a perpendicular field boundary (G26) extended across the point at which the track opened out into a field.

This was likely a measure to improve the control of livestock numbers into or out of the track, or perhaps merely to narrow the opening to limit the size of gate or hurdle required to close it. The function and destination of the route remains somewhat unclear, given the lack of archaeological investigation to the east of the site; however, the location of Earnley Rife, 300m to the east, may be pertinent, potentially providing fresh water for livestock.

A small assemblage of 1st-century Roman pottery was recovered across 15 contexts within this phase. The assemblage was dominated by early Rowlands Castle wares, along with three sherds

Fig. 7. Photograph of R1, looking north

of Arun Valley grey wares, two sherds of Baetican amphora and one sherd of highly abraded Samian ware of indeterminate source.

Two small, undiagnostic flint-tempered sherds of broadly later prehistoric date were also recovered. The remainder of the artefacts from this phase comprised two small fragments of fuel ash slag, which could have derived from any high-temperature activity, including domestic hearths.

The scarcity of botanical remains recovered from across period 1, phase 2 provided only limited information regarding the range of cereal crops used and cultivated at this time and cannot be considered representative of crop production at the site. Charred plant macrofossils included caryopses of wheat, all recovered in small quantities and poorly preserved, along with a single grain of wheat/barley.

Glume bases were mostly emmer/spelt, with only one identified as definitely spelt. Glume wheats (emmer or spelt) are not uncommon at other contemporary sites in southern England, while at Medmerry both hulled wheats and barley were recorded as the main crops present in Roman contexts (Vitolo 2019).

PERIOD 2: EARLY–MIDDLE ROMAN?

None of the ceramics recovered from the previous period were considered to post-date the end of the 1st century AD. The pottery from the field boundary ditches, whilst poorly stratified, spread across single homogenous fills, did suggest that towards the end of this century the ditches were gradual silting up and were no longer maintained.

A small quantity of similarly dated pottery was also recovered from the post-hole alignment, better stratified within the initial shallow deposits identified at the base of these post-holes which were likely to have accumulated briefly after the removal of the posts. This suggested that the fence line was removed at about the same time as the field system and its upkeep were neglected.

By the 2nd century AD the managed coaxial field system was probably barely visible within the landscape, perhaps only evident in shallow linear depressions or in surviving tree lines. However, this may not have been a period of hiatus.

Given the apparent continuity of settlement activity to the east of the site, around Earnley, from the late Iron Age/early Roman period through to the mid-4th century (Stephenson 2019) it seems more probable that the site was not abandoned. Instead,

it is suggested that the intensity of use changed, with the adoption of a much more open landscape from the early 2nd century onwards, potentially as part of a villa estate.

Four clusters of discrete features (G7, G8, G32 and G33) and three layers of dumped material, all located within the easternmost half of the site, were associated with this phase (Fig. 8). These three layers had characteristics which led to them being interpreted as possible Bronze Age burnt mounds at the evaluation stage (ASE 2014).

However, with the benefits offered by open area excavation and further investigation, it was possible to identify that two of these layers were dumped over ditches of period 1, phases 1 and 2 dates, and therefore, could not represent *in situ* Bronze Age deposits. Instead, it is considered likely that the material may have derived from burnt mounds later moved and dumped, possibly as part of an attempt to level the mounds.

Alternatively, the burnt mound material may have been appropriated to improve and level the ground, infilling depressions. It is noteworthy that one deposit [111] was located over the access to the period 1, phase 2 track (R1), an area likely softened and made boggy by repeated use (Fig. 9). In this area, the deposits rich in fire-cracked flint would have made an ideal material with which to fill the area, improve drainage and provide a firmer footing.

Burnt mounds are relatively common on the Manhood Peninsula, with known examples at Medmerry and postulated examples identified during walkover surveys at Sidlesham and Earnley (Stephenson 2019). It is certainly possible that there were examples at Bracklesham, in close proximity, if not within the site. A Bronze Age pit was also identified during the evaluation, immediately to the north off Clapper's Lane (ASE 2017), leaving no doubt of Bronze Age activity in the Bracklesham area.

However, it should also be noted that, given the lack of secure Bronze Age material within the deposits of fire-cracked flint and the lack of burnt mound features such as hearth and troughs within the site, it is possible that these deposits derived from a different flint heating or burning event, potentially contemporary with the period 2 activity.

The first group of discrete features attributed to this phase (G7) formed an irregular cluster. While one feature certainly represented an intentionally cut pit, [137], the remainder of features in this group demonstrated little regularity and appeared to represent the infilling of a previous landscape feature or tree throw, likely in multiple events.

The second cluster (G8) comprised four smaller, more regular cut features. Three had the form of stake-holes, while the fourth comprised a small pit or post-hole. They formed an irregular pattern, with two of the stake-holes [194] and [196] in close proximity to each other at a distance of 200mm, both 300mm from the small pit or post-hole [198]. The third stake-hole lay at a distance of 1.25m from the rest.

The form of these features strongly suggested that they supported a small, possibly temporary structure, but the function of this remains elusive. Both groups contained fills rich in fire-cracked flint and charcoal, similar to the layers mentioned above, and as a result have also been interpreted as possible redeposited burnt mound material, although they equally may have derived from a different heating or burning event.

The remaining groups in this phase of activity comprised two clusters of features in the north-west corner of Excavation Area 1 (G32 and G33). All were irregular and devoid of artefacts. Manganese concretions were deposited over the uneven bases and sides of the features, the centres of which were a reddened, slightly heat-affected silt clay.

These were considered to be the remains of the burnt-out roots of bushes or immature trees. Taking into account all the above features it is considered that period 2 represented a move towards a more open landscape, with good evidence of land clearance, particularly towards the easternmost extent of the site.

The environmental samples from this phase yielded small quantities of wood charcoal. Taxa identified included oak (*Quercus sp*.), *Maloideae* group taxa (which includes hawthorn, whitebeam, apple and rowan), hazel/alder (*Corylus/Alnus sp*.), cherry/blackthorn (*Prunus sp*.) and broom/gorse (*Leguminosae* taxa). Within the oak charcoal assemblage fragments derived from small roundwood, as well as larger, slow-grown wood specimens. No roundwood was noted for any of the other taxa recorded.

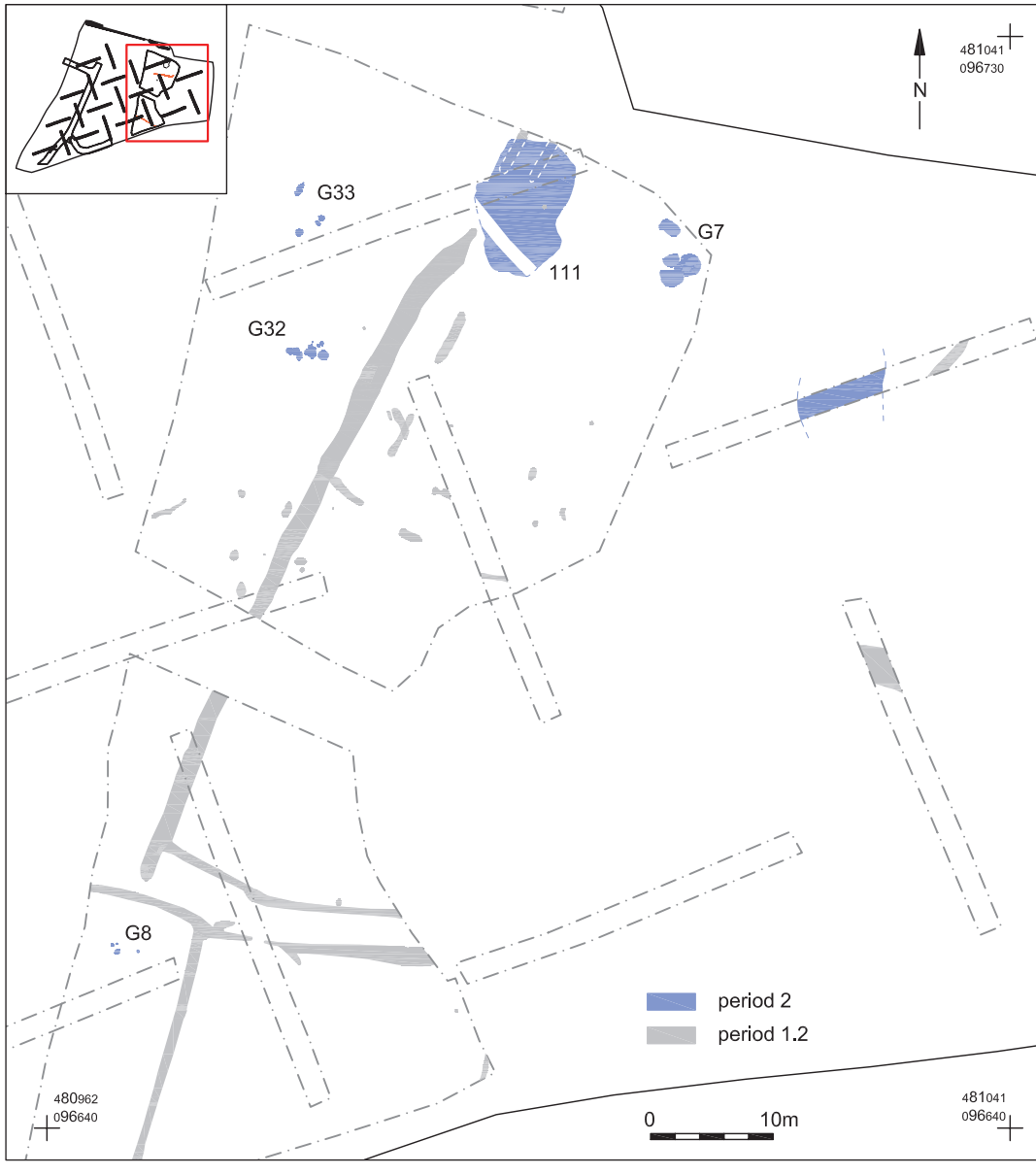

Fig. 8. Plan of period 2 features.

PERIOD 3: LATER ROMAN?

The period 3 activity was characterised by a new phase of ditch cutting, on a different alignment from that seen in period 1, phase 2, and on a different alignment to that existing today. Here the boundaries were orientated roughly north-west to south-east. A single boundary identified at the far western edge of the site was the only one to be orientated at a perpendicular angle, possibly suggesting much larger enclosure dimensions in this period than those seen in Period 1.2.

Maintenance of this field system was evidenced by two ditches, G9 and G10 (Fig. 10). These ditches lay in close proximity to each other, on just

Fig. 9. Photograph of deposit [111], looking south-west.

marginally different alignments. The area internal to the two ditches narrowed to the north, with the ditches most likely meeting shortly beyond the excavated area.

This ruled out an interpretation as a trackway; instead it seems that one must have been slightly later in date than the other, recut in a marginally different location. The lack of dating and stratigraphic relationships made it impossible to be certain which was the earliest of the two but, due to their alignment, they are both considered part of the same use of the landscape.

The dearth of material culture continued into period 3, severely hampering a definite timeline for the end of period 2, the duration of any hiatus in activity between the periods and the inception of period 3. Just two small sherds of pottery of 1st century AD date were recovered from the field system. One sherd was likely to be post-conquest; however, it could not be ruled out that the other might be late Iron Age. Both sherds consisted of early Rowlands Castle wares, and both were considered residual.

The remainder of artefacts from this phase comprised 19 fragments of animal bone, most very poorly preserved but three identified as cattle teeth. The environmental samples taken from this phase yielded oak and ash wood charcoal in small quantities; all appeared to come from heartwood rather than roundwood.

No land division post-dating period 3 was identifiable within the site area. The current field boundaries match the orientation of those of the period 1, phase 2 field system, indicating that, following period 3, the landscape reverted back to the late Iron Age/early Roman alignment, but that the size of the later fields was considerably greater than their predecessors.

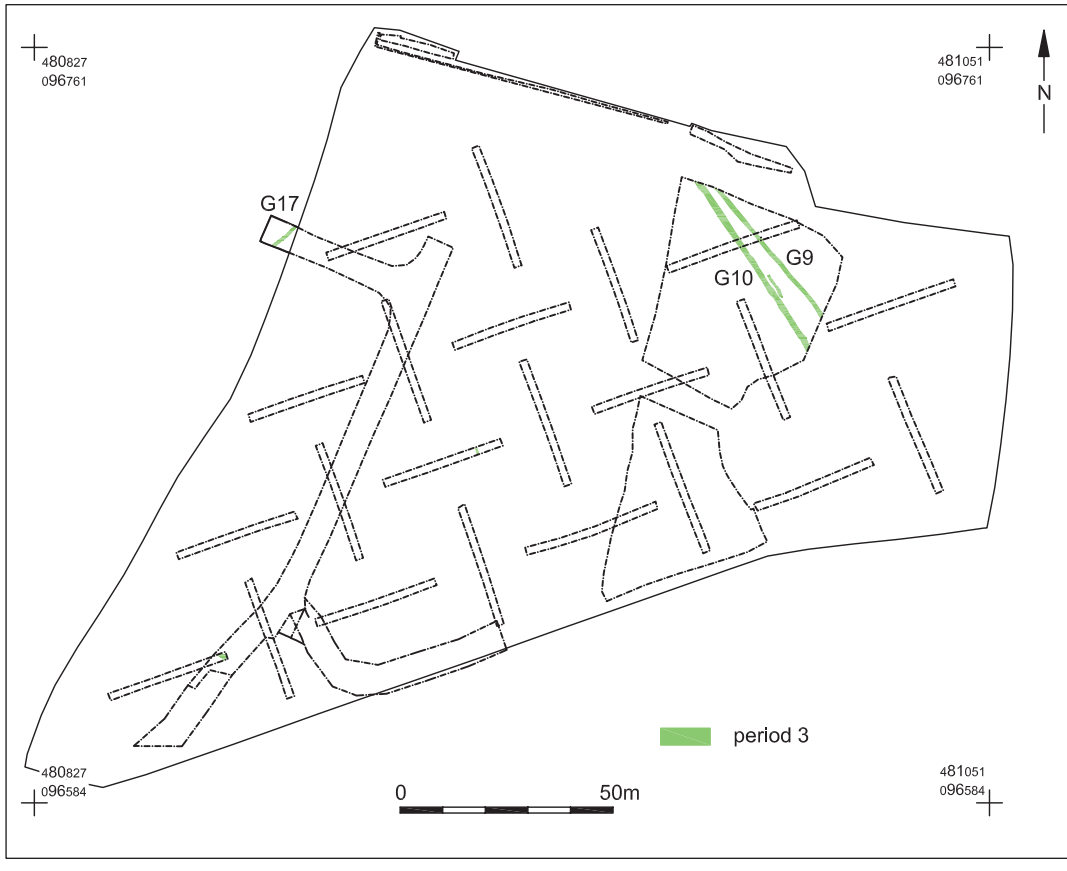

Fig. 10. Plan of period 3 features.

DISCUSSION

While the earliest phase of activity identified was limited in its extent, it pointed to early enclosure of the landscape. The dating of this phase was poor but a later Iron Age date is postulated as most likely. This would be in keeping with the evidence immediately to the north, recovered during an evaluation off Clapper's Lane, and that recovered at Medmerry to the east (Fig. 11; ASE 2017; Stephenson 2019). Both sites had evidence of Bronze Age activity, but little to suggest early or middle Iron Age use of the landscape.

At both sites a return of human presence was evident towards the latter half of the Iron Age. Together, this evidence supports the current theory of a hiatus of datable human activity on the Manhood Peninsula and the wider coastal plain between the late Bronze Age/early Iron Age and the middle/late Iron Age (Bedwin 1983; Stephenson 2019).

A peak in human activity was evident at Beech Avenue by the late Iron Age/early Roman period, evidenced by an organised coaxial field system with trackways, maintaining similar alignments as the embryonic first phase of enclosure. This landscape arrangement also appeared to continue north, across the Clapper's Lane site, covering an area of at least 7.5ha.

The evidence from Beech Avenue builds on the current picture of the western coastal plain as a well organised, widely settled landscape by the late Iron Age, with large areas given over to agriculture (Hart 2015).

The postulated Roman road noted by the HER, marked on historic maps as 'causeway' and now the route of the present day B2198, lies just 200m to the west of the site. Its orientation mirrors exactly

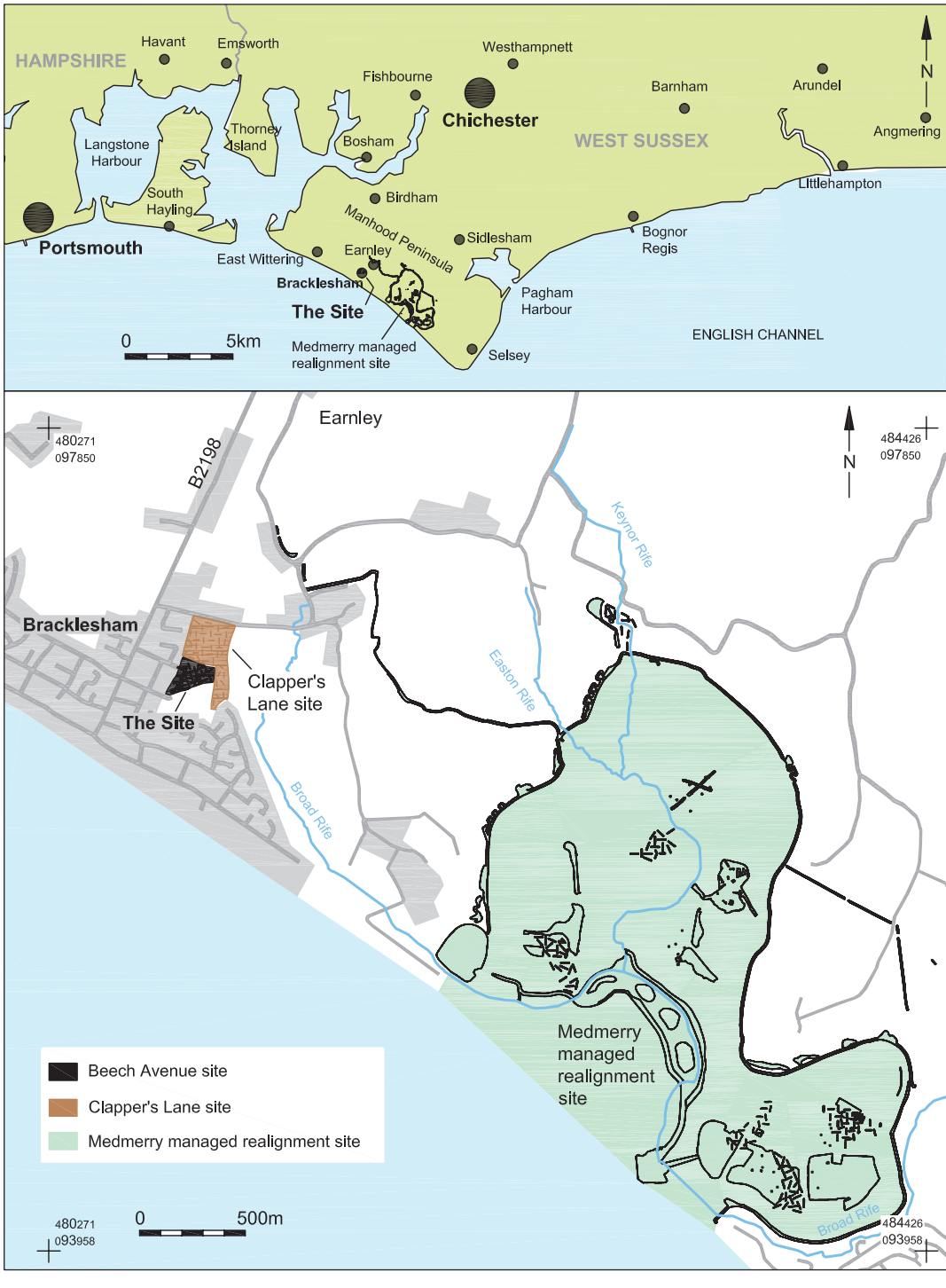

Fig. 11. Site location in relation to other archaeological sites in the vicinity.

the alignment of the late Iron Age/early Roman field system at Beech Avenue. Furthermore, the orientation of the post-hole alignment is equally identical to the 'causeway'.

It is suggested that the evidence recovered from this site adds weight to the identification of this possible routeway, even though no physical evidence of a road has as yet been recorded. It may also be suggested that the road could pre-date the Roman period, although this would require further analysis and likely further excavations in the vicinity of Bracklesham to narrow the date range.

Should this route have been contemporary with the late Iron Age/early Roman field system at Beech Avenue, it could indicate that the farming community at Bracklesham was well-connected with Birdham, and possibly Chichester, by the turn of the millennium, at a time when Chichester was becoming the centre of activity on the western coastal plain.

At this time, it is suggested, the localised power structure moved from upland South Downs sites and became focused in and around Chichester (Bedwin 1983; Davenport 2003), remaining there throughout the Roman period. Unfortunately, the very limited artefactual material recovered from the site makes it impossible to be certain of the degree of influence the local elite had over the inhabitants of the Bracklesham landscape, or even the degree of contact between the two.

Within the late Iron Age/early Roman field system at Beech Avenue, the possible palisade or fence line (S1) is both curious and difficult to explain. The evidence on site identified a single line of substantial post-holes parallel, and internal to, the east ditch of an enclosure.

To have such a structure along just a single side of an enclosure would appear to make little sense. Certainly, it would be ineffectual on its own to contain or keep anything out. Concerted efforts to find comparable examples on the coastal plain and further afield, have produced few results. Two sites, one at Toddington Lane, Littlehampton, the other at Roundstone Lane, Angmering, had evidence for substantial post-hole alignments parallel to ditches, but in both cases these appeared to form complete enclosures and are dated to the 2nd to 3rd century AD.

At Toddington they were interpreted as likely palisades within enclosure ditches for corralling large, or large numbers of livestock within a restricted area. At Roundstone Lane they may have supported a building (Nicholls 2017; Wallis 2017).

Instead, it is suggested that the most logical interpretation for the post-holes at Beech Avenue is to mark a boundary, potentially between whatever lay in the east and an area of greater importance, most likely located to the west of the palisade or fence. A gap in the row of post-holes within the southern half of the alignment could support an interpretation as a gateway. This raises the question as to what form and function this area of greater importance to the west may have had.

Returning to the HER and its details on the 'causeway', it is suggested that the Roman route linked Birdham with coastal facilities, located potentially under Bracklesham or out to sea. While this can only be very tentatively suggested, this possible palisade or fence could point to some sort of site or facility within or beyond the south-west corner of the site, potentially in the region of the Beech and Garden Avenue residential properties.

These properties were built between the 1930s and 1960s, at a time when development did not require archaeological investigation and mitigation. While it is likely that the groundworks associated with the construction of these properties may have destroyed any archaeological evidence in the area, it is possible that some survives, in gardens or areas of low impact.

It is suggested that following the 1st century AD, within period 2, a concerted effort was made to actively clear the landscape at Beech Avenue to create a more open environment. The very limited artefactual and environmental evidence offers little information as to why this occurred.

However, with two large Roman complexes on the Manhood Peninsula, one at Fishbourne, the other at Sidlesham, it is possible the events at Beech Avenue indicate an incorporation of the land into a large estate associated with one of these.

A hiatus following period 2 is considered probable, the date of which is suggested to lie around the end of the 3rd century/middle of the 4th century AD. While the lack of artefactual and environmental evidence cannot corroborate this, it is considered to be the most likely interpretation, taking into account the decline of the Roman sites at Fishbourne and Sidlesham and their postulated estates or territories, which are considered to have continued up to the late 3rd to early 4th centuries (Manley and Rudkin 2003; HER MWS5393).

Furthermore, the evidence from Medmerry indicated a hiatus following the middle of the 4th century, the cause of which was also considered to be associated with storm surges and a long-term increase in relative sea level (RSL) making the area less habitable (Stephenson 2019).

Once again, the dearth of dating evidence has led to doubt as to the date of the return of activity in the landscape following the hiatus. However, what was clear was that following the period of abandonment, a concerted effort was made to reorganise the landscape on an altered alignment to that of previous periods.

The return of settlement activity on the Medmerry site, in close proximity to Earnley, was of Saxo-Norman date, which could be the case at Beech Avenue, given that there are literary records noting Bracklesham's existence in AD 945 (CgMs 2012). However, the Saxo-Norman evidence from Earnley, comprising possible hollow ways, was orientated on a north–south alignment.

Much of the successive medieval activity identified around Earnley was also north–south aligned, as were the possible medieval ditches identified during the Clapper's Lane evaluation to the immediate north of the site (Stephenson 2019; ASE 2017). This throws doubt as to the date of the period 3 activity at Beech Avenue and whether it can be assumed to be contemporary with the return of activity at Medmerry and Clapper's Lane. However, it should be noted that the Saxo-Norman and medieval activity at Earnley, along with the medieval activity at Clapper's Lane, was all poorly dated.

The few post-Roman features within the landscape on similar alignments to the period 3 activity comprise part of the Earnley/East Wittering parish boundary, the Drove Road south of Earnley and part of the western end of Broad Rife, the alignment of which is illustrated on the Heron-Allen 1911 copy of William Weeke's Survey map of Selsey from 1672.

Further investigation is required in the Bracklesham area to cement the understanding of the Saxo-Norman and medieval landscape and to ascertain the date of the period 3 alignments. There is no evidence of land division within the site area on OS mapping from 1870 onwards.

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